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Quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education: Procedures and practices

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Abstract

This paper discusses current trends of quality assurance procedures and practices in Ethiopian higher education. The result revealed that “accreditation of program and institution”, and “institutional audit” are the emerging principal types of quality assurance in Ethiopia. There is a tendency towards “accreditation of program and institution” in the private and “institutional audit” in both public and private higher education institutions (HEIs). There is also a tendency of implementing “quality control” in private and “quality improvement” in public HEIs. Public HEIs did not implement recommendations forwarded in audit reports, and no follow-up action was taken by the quality assurance agency.

Keywords: Ethiopia; HERQA; Higher education; Practice; Procedures; Quality assurance

1. Introduction

Education is one of the fundamental factors for development. Higher education (HE) is generally considered as an important contributor to the socio-economic development of any countries. According to Gillis, “today, more than ever before in human history, the wealth - or poverty - of nations depends on the quality of higher education” (Gillis cited in Task Force on Higher Education and Society 2000, p. 15). UNESCO (1993) also clearly states that “without a good training and research system at higher education level, no country could assure a degree of progress compatible with the needs and expectations of a society in which economic development is accompanied by building of a culture of peace based on democracy, tolerance and mutual respect” (p.1).

In order to achieve their objectives, higher education institutions (HEIs) should keep providing quality education. The term “quality” in education has been defined by different authors and authorities but there is no absolute definition of quality as it is context bounded. In this paper, however, quality is considered as achieving goals and

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aims in an effective and efficient way, assuming the goals and aims reflect the requirements of all stakeholders in an adequate way (IUCEA, 2008a).

The issue of quality in HE has been discussed for the last three decades at different levels. In Europe, “the history of system-wide quality assurance mechanisms in HE started in the early 80s” (Francesco & Sangiorgi, 2006, p. 52). But this does not mean that there was no notion of quality in HE before. Even though it is not in an explicit way, HE has the notion of quality even before early 1980s (IUCEA, 2008b). The issue of quality is developed from nationwide to regional and international level in a more harmonized way and a number of networks working on quality assurance (QA) were established to develop and improve quality culture and internal and external QA (Vroeijenstijn, 2008). For instance, the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA), which consist three East African countries (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda), works on regional QA initiative and aims to develop a harmonized QA system at institution, national and regional level. Although Ethiopia is not member of this regional initiative, it is one of the African countries that expressed their concern about issues of QA of their HE (Materu, 2007).

The emergence of private HEIs and the need to regulate their activities appears to have been the main trigger for the establishment of QA agencies in most countries (Materu, 2007). In Ethiopia, more than the demand for efficiency and competitiveness, the new vision on relationship between the state and HEIs (the increasing pressure in demand for transparency and accountability by government, especially after granting institutional autonomy), the private initiatives in HE, and international discourses on quality in HE can be mentioned as the main rationales for the establishment of QA agency. Although it is almost a decade since the higher education relevance and quality agency (HERQA) established, there is little research conducted in relation to QA in Ethiopian HE system. In this paper, therefore, attempts are made to discuss the QA system in Ethiopia with the purpose of promoting the quality assurance process through critical research. Accordingly, this paper is intended to answer the following basic question - what are the current trends of QA in the Ethiopian HE?

2. Methodology

Data was collected through document review. Document review was used to generate data from different reports, manuals, procedures, case studies, and working papers. Among HEIs that conducted self evaluation and audited by HERQA, Bahir Dar University (BDU), the institution in which the authors of this paper are working and have easy access for data, was purposefully selected mainly to illustrate the self-evaluation and institutional audit procedures and practices in Ethiopian HEIs. In this study, thematic analysis was used to provide rich description of the data set. The themes were basically drawn partly from the generated data and from the major point raised in the research question.

3. Quality assurance procedures and practices in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian HE system is closely controlled in its management, conservative in its intellectual orientation and limited in its autonomy (Saint, 2004). The relevance and quality of the education and research activities are not up to expected standards and levels (World Bank, 2003). Although quality of education is mentioned in the Ethiopian education and training policy, until 2003, the issues of quality was missing both in the Ministry of Education (MOE) and HEIs. The Ethiopian HE system is currently in the midst of a very rapid expansion and “it is always difficult for any nation to maintain quality standards in the midst of rapid enrollment expansion” (Saint, 2004, p.106), because expansion and quality are often in constant counter-play, especially so where resources are in short supply (Teferra, 2007). Research also indicates that there is a perceived decline in the quality of HE in Ethiopia (Amare, 2006), particularly after the aggressive expansion and massification of HE.

The government of Ethiopia gave due acknowledgement for HE quality in 2003 by ratifying the higher education proclamation (HEP) and establishing the agency in charge of HE relevance and quality. HERQA was established through the HEP (351/2003, Article 78) as an autonomous legal body to supervise the relevance and quality of HE offered by any institution. The proclamation states that the agency is accountable to the MOE. The agency publishes a statement explaining the division of responsibility for quality procedures between the agency and HEIs. It also

publishes information such as composition of the external quality audit teams, report of activities, focus areas for quality audit and self-evaluation, institutional audit procedures, external quality audit reports, and periodic information to the public about the current situation and status of HEIs.

The agency relies almost entirely on government funding followed by grants from the World Bank and the Netherlands Government. In the future, service fees are supposed to be one potential sources of finance. Its governing bodies and top management are appointed by government. The agency submits its findings and recommendation to the MOE, and cannot make final decision.

According to HERQA (2006a), institutional quality audit is “an in-depth analysis and assessment of the quality and relevance of programs and of the teaching and learning environment. Equally importantly, an institutional quality audit will assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of a HEI’s approach to quality care, its systems of accountability and its internal review mechanisms (p.4).” This definition constitutes the widely used definitions of both evaluation and institutional audit. Evaluation is a general process of a systematic and critical analysis leading to judgments and recommendations regarding the quality of a HE institution or a program; and institutional audit is a process that investigates the procedures and the mechanisms by which an institution ensures its QA and quality enhancement (UNESCO, 2007).

The second European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA, 2008) survey asserts that two-thirds of European QA agencies conducting audits at institutional level also evaluate programs, and half of them also accredit programs, and evaluate and accredit institutions. In the case of Ethiopia, in private HEIs, HERQA mainly engaged in accrediting programs and institutions; whereas, in public HEIs it conducts audits at institutional level but does not evaluate and accredit programs and institutions. Here, we should note that HERQA has already developed a pre-accreditation procedure for graduate programs but not yet implemented.

The purpose of institutional audit is to monitor QA process in universities. It also helps to make sure that institutions are providing higher education, awards and qualifications of acceptable quality and appropriate academic standards (Castelluccio & Masotti, 2006, p. 28). In order to achieve these purpose, HERQA identified ten areas of focus for institutional quality audits, which serves as common frame of reference for the review of quality within the Ethiopian HE system. The ten areas of focus for institutional quality audits are: (1) vision, mission and educational goals; (2) governance and management system; (3) infrastructure and learning resources; (4) academic and support staff; (5) student admission and support services; (6) program relevance and curriculum; (7) teaching, learning and assessment; (8) student progression and graduate outcomes; (9) research and outreach activities; and (10) internal quality assurance (HERQA, 2006a).

For its institutional quality audit, HERQA developed the following procedures - (1) HEI carries out an institutional self evaluation and prepares a self evaluation document; (2) HEI sends its self-evaluation document to HERQA and informs HERQA their wish to have an institutional quality audit; (3) HERQA and HEI agree a date for the institutional quality audit; (4) HERQA establishes an external institutional quality audit team in consultation with the HEI; (5) HERQA institutional quality audit team makes a one-day briefing visit to the HEI; (6) HERQA institutional quality audit team makes a four-day institutional quality audit visit to HEI; (7) HERQA issues a quality audit report; and (8) HEI prepares an action plan to enhance quality and relevance. There is also a follow-up on HERQA’s institutional quality audit report (HERQA, 2006a).

Since the establishment of HERQA, for the first time in 2007, some of the HEIs carried out self-evaluation in a way that can be considered as systematized and organized. The self-evaluation process is carried out at institution level with the request of HERQA. It was also in 2007 that the first institutional audit carried out by the external QA agency - HERQA. The term “quality assurance” in this paper includes processes such as evaluation, accreditation and audit.

3.1. Internal accreditation and self evaluation in Bahir Dar University

BDU provides both undergraduate and graduate programs for regular, continuing, summer and distance students. The programs are not accredited by HERQA, as there is no such functional accreditation system for the state funded universities. However, all programs should pass through a system that can be considered as “internal accreditation”.

Even before HERQA’s request for self-evaluation, there were some elements of internal quality assurance (IQA) in BDU; for example, teachers’ evaluation in non-systemic way. Teachers are evaluated by students, department

head and colleagues biannually. But when we look at the purpose of this evaluation and the way the outcome is used, its contribution to the effectiveness of teaching-learning is almost insignificant. It is often used for promotion purposes rather than enhancing quality and professional development of the teacher. Because, teachers receive only the total mark they obtained which does not show their strength and weaknesses. Thus, many teachers do not care about this type of evaluation except those who want to apply for promotion. This trend is not improved yet even under HERQA's direction.

3.1.1. Internal accreditation

Different authorities define accreditation in a slightly different ways. Accreditation can be defined as “a formal published statement regarding the quality of an institution or a program following a cyclical evaluation based on agreed standards” (Batteau, 2006, p. 147). For the purpose of this paper, we used the definition given by Harvey (2004) that reads “the establishment or of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, program or module of study.” Based on this definition, “internal accreditation” refers to the establishment or of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of a study program where departments and faculties seek the establishment or legitimacy of a new study program from the responsible body of the institution.

The “internal accreditation” procedure of BDU comprises the following steps. First, the curriculum committees at department level prepare a study program in compliance with the institutions legislation and the HEP. Then, the department prepares application that contains a brief overview of the program (background, rationales and objectives of the program), staff profile, available resources, graduate profile, employment prospective, program requirements (admission and graduation), degree nomenclature, course coding, objective and description of courses, etc. Second, the department submits an application to the respective faculty for further evaluation. If there are comments, the department reconsiders those comments and sends them back to the respective faculty. If the faculty finds the program relevant for the society and the country's development, it sends the entire document and its comment to the university's Academic Program Office (APO). Third, in consultation with the faculty and the department, the APO asks other institutions for external review. There is no agreed number of external reviewers but in most cases it is either one or two. The office arranges a workshop where external reviewers present and discuss the result of their evaluation. Then, the APO sends to the department all the comments and feedbacks forwarded by the external reviewer for reconsideration. Finally, if the APO found the suggestions forwarded by external reviewer are well-considered or defended by the department, it presents all the documents to Academic Standards and Curriculum Review Committee (ASCRC) of the Senate for final decision – to start or not to start the study program. This kind of “internal accreditation” is compulsory for every new degree program. On the other hand, programs that are adopted from other institutions and did not pass through such “internal accreditation” process are also equally functioning.

As mentioned earlier, study programs in public universities are not accredited by the accrediting agency and BDU is no exception. In BDU's “internal accreditation” procedure, there are no written and officially agreed standards used for evaluation. There is also no systemic procedure set by the university to evaluate the “internally accredited” study programs.

3.1.2. Self-evaluation

BDU is one of the eight public universities that have been requested by HERQA to conduct self-evaluation in 2007. According to BDU's self-evaluation report, the self-evaluation is undertaken for two specific purposes - to identify the apparent strengths and weaknesses of the institution in terms of the ten focus areas of quality audit, and to meet the requirement of HERQA (BDU, 2007, p.14).

There was no particular department or unit responsible to organize and carry out the self-evaluation. Thus, the president office asked the coordinator of Academic and Development Resource Center (ADRC) to organize and lead the task force selected for this particular purpose. The task force contained 32 members composed of managers, senior faculties, staffs and student body. Because of the limited time available to conduct the self-evaluation, the university was not able to include alumni and employers (BDU, 2007). Since many members of the task force lack

awareness about quality and self-evaluation procedures, a half-day briefing workshop were given by HERQA on the general purpose of the self evaluation, procedures to be followed, areas of evaluation, specific points to be addressed, operational definition of quality and quality audit and how teams should make judgments of quality.

The self-evaluation was carried out within two weeks. It was not aimed to be done in this short time, but as the university did not have a responsible unit for internal quality, most of the allocated time was lost without finding the right people who are able to conduct the self-evaluation. And in the last weeks, selected people were promised to be paid for the additional workload and they accomplished the task in two weeks. The task force was divided into groups, each group then worked on specific evaluation areas (the 10 focus areas) and the coordinator of the task force compiled those pieces of documents and sent it to the university's president office for approval and to send it to HERQA. There was no discussion among the task force on the draft of the self-evaluation report in any form.

3.1.3. Institutional audit

After six months, HERQA sent a quality audit team composed of five members to carry out an institutional audit at BDU. The quality audit team consisted of two quality experts from HERQA staff and three other external auditors selected and trained by HERQA (HERQA, 2006b). HERQA nominates audit team and HEIs have the right to comment on the make-up of audit teams, but not to suggest or nominate. The quality audit team visited BDU for three days. The team had meetings with higher officials, board members, faculties, staffs, student representatives, and observed teaching-learning facilities, infrastructures, and overviewed different documents of the university and the self-evaluation report. Then, an institutional quality audit report is prepared by audit team. Before publishing the audit report, HERQA sends the draft report to the HEI to check factual accuracy and gives the right for complaints and the report will not be issued until the final outcome of the complaint established (HERQA, 2006a). After that, the audit report is published and owned by HERQA.

4. Result and discussion

4.1. Stakeholders participation

Quality culture is not a well developed notion in Ethiopian HE, and thus there is no well established system of QA. Even though a range of stakeholders need to have a role in the specification of processes and criteria for external QA (ENQA, 2008), HERQA is the only stakeholder group with a formal role, and HEIs are the only stakeholders consulted by HERQA. The final decision on the specification of processes and criteria for external quality procedures is made by HERQA.

4.2. Autonomy of HERQA

QA agencies should be independent to the extent that they have both autonomous responsibility for their operations and that their conclusions and recommendations cannot be influenced by third parties, such as HEIs, ministries or other stakeholders (ENQA, 2009). The Ethiopian HEP asserts that HERQA is an autonomous agency which is accountable to the MOE (FDRE, 2003), but since it does not have the right to establish its own law, board and cannot make final decision based on its findings, it may not be considered as an autonomous body. The World Bank working paper also specifies HERQA as one of the national QA agencies in Africa that have no autonomy (Materu, 2007). According to ENQA (2008), independence is interpreted as "autonomous responsibility for operations, where conclusions in reports cannot be influenced by HEIs, ministries or other stakeholders" (p.31).

4.3. The purpose of QA

In Ethiopia, the quality assessment system is initiated by the central governmental authorities and the development of QA processes relates to the purposes of HE. The quality assessment system in the HE seems more emphasized on the changing needs and pressures of the environment such as accountability (extrinsic qualities) than the values of the search for truth and the pursuit of knowledge (intrinsic qualities). The extrinsic and intrinsic qualities are perceived as the two important dimensions of any present-day system of quality assessment in HE (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). The World Bank's sector study suggests that "the function of quality assurance is to hold institutions ultimately accountable for their performance in teaching and research and provides learners with a guarantee that they will receive a certain standard of education in return for their investment of time and resources" (World Bank, 2003, p. XI). As the QA system in Ethiopia established because of external pressures, it inclines to meet external accountability, and according to Ashcroft (2004), this makes quality enhancement a by-product, not a central feature of QA.

4.4. Accreditation

Accreditation fosters quality improvement in HEIs (Hayward, 2006) and enables to assure a threshold level of quality, but it is much less suited to stimulate continuing improvement above the threshold level (Westerheijden, Hulpiau, & Waeytens, 2006). Ethiopian HEIs are on the phase of achieving a threshold level quality. Hence, accreditation will have a significant contribution in the process of QA. That is why in countries like the United States, accreditation becomes the first process of quality assessment (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994).

In several countries, public institutions that are established by acts of Parliament, by statute, or by decree are "accredited" *de jure* (by law) but not as the result of the accreditation procedures (Hayward, 2006). Though the Government of Ethiopia has decided that all public and private HEIs are subject to accreditation (FDRE, 2003), until now accreditation procedures are not yet applied to public HEIs. Based on the current situation and accreditation tendency, we can argue that public HEIs are "accredited" *de jure*.

4.5. The purpose of self-evaluation

In many cases, it has been exercised that self-evaluation serves as prerequisite for external quality audit or evaluation. However, it also provides an opportunity for the institution, which carried out the self-evaluation, to identify its weaknesses and strengths. Literature suggests that self-evaluation is the most valuable aspect of QA processes because it fosters social cohesion and teamwork among staff, enhances staff accountability of the results of the process and helps institutions to identify their own strengths and weaknesses (Materu, 2007). In the case of BDU, though there are a number of limitations in the procedures itself (from task force selection to the report compilation), the self-evaluation helped the university in identifying some of its strengths and weaknesses. As mentioned earlier, the self-evaluation in BDU is not self-initiated and this has a negative effect in the predominant objective of self-evaluation and quality enhancement, which will be successfully achieved if the institution itself initiates the self-evaluation; otherwise, it will be a task given by external agency that lacks the internal motivation of the institution, which is one of the basic conditions for effective self-evaluation.

The contents of the self-evaluation of BDU are exactly similar with HERQA's proposed structured contents. The aims of the self-evaluation should not be only to prepare the institution for the visiting team, but also to stimulate internal quality enhancement (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman 1990 cited in Westerheijden, Hulpiau, & Waeytens, 2006). Hence, even if BDU used the content of the self-evaluation given by HERQA for reasons of comparability, the content should not be fixed to that completely. HEIs to be audited can stress points which are important to their IQA (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994).

4.6. Internal quality assurance

One of the ten focus areas identified by HERQA for external quality audit is IQA. Emphasizing this, the director of the agency clearly states that HERQA "will not do any external quality audit unless quality care units are

organized and made functional by HEIs” (Tesfaye, 2006, p.3). However, the 2007 external quality audit was carried out in BDU in the absence of IQA, and one of the main recommendations of the audit report is the urgent need to establish an IQA system in BDU. HERQA (2006a) states that “it needs to be kept in mind that HERQA’s institutional audit team will seek to verify what the HEI has written in their self evaluation document, to compare their evidence and to judge the appropriateness and quality of the educational provision and the effectiveness of *the quality assurance system*” (p. 8) [emphasis added]. It seems very difficult to assess the effectiveness of the institution’s education quality in general and IQA system in particular where there is lack of awareness about quality, quality procedures and systematized IQA.

4.7. Audit report

In its institutional audit procedure document, HERQA clearly states that audit reports should be published (HERQA, 2006a). Accordingly, the audit report, which is more of descriptive rather than analytical, and describes the good practices and forwards essential recommendations, is published. The audit reports are distributed to all universities, including those who did not participate in the institutional audit. HERQA also states that the report can be available in its main office and website for those who are interested. Thus, we can say that in Ethiopia, the audit report is not confidential rather public. Concerning the institutional self-evaluation report, the generated data do not precisely show whether it is confidential or public but it is confirmed that BDU did not disseminate the self-evaluation report to stakeholders, even to the university community.

4.8. Actions taken

Until now, there is no explicit action taken by the MOE on the basis of the audit results. This is conceivably acceptable mainly for two reasons. First, the procedures followed in the self-evaluation are not well structured and good enough for decision-making. Second, as the quality culture and QA system is premature, it should not be hampered by direct consequences of decisions. Contrary to what has been exercised in other several countries, the external audit results in Ethiopia are not used for making reallocations of funds and ranking the audited institutions. There is a debate whether to use the outcome of external QA audit for ranking purpose. Ashcroft (2004) and van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) argue that such a report should not have the function of judging or ranking the institutions. Instead, it should be used to enhance the quality of HE. To date, there is no intention of using the institutional quality audit report for the purpose of ranking HEIs in Ethiopia. However, the new Ethiopian HE funding formula indicates that the quality of education, research and community services rendered by the institution are some of the elements used for budget allocation system (Merisotis, 2003; World Bank, 2003). This clearly shows that, in future, the outcome of QA audit could be used as a criterion for funding HEIs.

In general, the external QA procedure used by HERQA is almost similar with the European Standards and Guidelines four-stage model for external quality procedure in a way that it includes (1) self-evaluation by HEIs; (2) external audit by a group of experts and site visits as decided by the agency after consulting the HEI; (3) publication of a report, including best practices and recommendations, but without any decisions; and (4) a follow-up procedure to evaluate actions taken by the HEIs based on any of the recommendations contained in the report. However, in case of HERQA, it is not clear whether the follow-up procedure is to evaluate actions taken by the HEIs. According to HERQA institutional audit procedure, making recommendations for action by HEIs, asking a report on the actions taken, and requesting feedback on the institutional quality audit are considered as tasks to be accomplished on the follow-up stage.

5. Conclusion

HERQA is the only external QA agency that predominantly accredits and audits all types of HEIs in Ethiopia. HERQA seems a semi-autonomous agency in a sense that it is independent from stakeholders in defining and operationalizing its procedures and methods, and nominating and appointing external experts. However, the

determination of the outcomes of its QA processes is not undertaken autonomously and independently from the government, particularly MOE. The agency's responsibility is to conduct accreditation and institutional audit, and submit its findings and recommendations to the MOE. It cannot make decision based on its findings. Moreover, the director of the agency is appointed by the government (FDRE, 2003 HEP Act. 83) and the chairperson of the board of agency is representative of the MOE. Because of these twist relationship between the agency and the government, audit and accreditation decision may be influenced by the MOE. This obstructs the agency to prove its credibility. It also makes difficult for Ethiopian HEIs to get recognition with regard to accreditation by the international accrediting bodies as they are not accredited by fully autonomous and independent agency.

There is no evaluation, accreditation or audit at subject level carried out by HERQA. "Accreditation of program and institution", and "institutional audit" are the emerging principal types of QA in Ethiopia. There is a tendency towards "accreditation of program and institution" in the private and "institutional audit" in both public and private HEIs. There is also a tendency of "quality control" in private and "quality improvement" in public HEIs institutions.

HERQA does not put any of the public universities in its list of pre-accredited, accredited and re-accredited HEIs. This implicitly indicates the confiscation of accreditation from the public institutions. As novice to the QA system, the absence of accreditation in the public HEIs impairs the quality of education they provide. Since accreditation requires the achievement of threshold standards of quality, it would have given public HEIs the opportunity to work hard and meet minimum standards set for accreditation.

The ultimate goal of any type of external QA is to maintain and improve the quality of HE. Until now, BDU did not design an action plan to implement the recommendations given by HERQA's audit report. The principal goal of external QA will not be realized unless institutions make every possible effort to implement those achievable recommendations listed in the audit report in an appropriate way. Thus, BDU and other audited universities should implement the recommendations and request HERQA for a follow-up before the next external QA which will be expected to be carried out in 2012.

The existing QA system seems a top-down approach as both the initiation and procedures come from HERQA to institutions. The QA system also inclines to external QA, which focuses on accountability than IQA, which focuses on quality improvement.

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